

COLOR FIELD PAINTING the American art movement

described in
characteristics,
goals, history and
theory



'Beginning', painting of Kenneth Noland, 1958

Color / Color Field Painting – a mainly American modern art movement is described here in quotes by art-critic Karen Wilkins; she presents definitions and theory of the artists. The text-quotes are taken from Wilkin's article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting'; where she describes the American art movement in theory, history & techniques of the painter artists like Mark Rothko, Barnett Newmann, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Helen Frankenthaler. Wilkin's article was published in the art book "Color as Field – American Painting 1950 – 1975".

- editor, *Fons Heijnsbroek / Matrozenhof on TES*

COLOR / COLOUR FIELD painting, described in art-quotes of Karen Wilkin

- The artworks of the so called Color Field painters (Gottlieb, Newman, Rothko, Hans Hofmann, ed.) dramatically enlarged the meaning of the label 'Abstract Expressionism', but through the clarifying lens of hindsight, they also seem to prefigure ideasof the loosely associated, aesthetically and chronologically divers group who came to be categorized under the rubric 'Color Field'. These were the painters – among them, Helen Frankenthaler, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Jules Olitski – whose work was include in the exhibition 'Post Painterly Abstraction (Los Angeles, 1964, curated by Greenberg, ed.).

* *source:* Karen Wilkin's article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting'. It was published in the artbook "Color as Field – American Painting 1950 – 1975".

- Their art (the painters Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland, Olitski, ed.) can be read as departing from the

possibilities suggested by Rothko's poised rectangles: the primacy of color, frontality, spatial and emotional ambiguity, and a paradoxical 'signature' anonymity, with the deployment of surprising hues made to assume the burden of associative meaning.

* *source:* Karen Wilkin's article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting'.

- Yet in many ways, these paintings (of the painters Frankenthaler, Louis, Noland, Olitski, ed.) are more distinguished by their 'cool' – in Marshall McLuhan sense of the word – than by any obvious relation to Abstract Expressionism... ..with their insubstantial surfaces and deliberately suppressed 'handwriting', all appear strikingly reticent, not only physically but also psychologically. As their younger colleague Frank Stella famously recorded: 'What you see is what you see'.

* *from:* Karen Wilkin's article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' – published in the artbook "Color as Field – American Painting 1950 – 1975

- ...The 'post-painterly' conception of 'cool' (still, ed.) included the belief that a painting, no matter how apparently restrained, could address the viewer's whole being – emotions, intellect, and all – through the eye, just as music did through the ear (this was also an invention used in European Futurism and Orphism of Delaunay, ed.) .

* *source:* article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by Karen Wilkin.

- It was assumed that any work of art worthy of the designation was loaded with the artist's baggage, and that viewers would view any work of art through the filter of their own prejudices and associations.

* *from:* Karen Wilkin's article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting'.

- What sets the best Color Field paintings apart (from Abstract Expressionism, ed.) is the extraordinary economy of means with which they manage not only to engage our feelings but also to ravish the eye. At times, it can seem as if the artist's goal was to see how stripped-down a picture could be before it ceased to be interesting to look at.

* *source:* article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by Karen Wilkin.

- Discrete shapes, dynamic imbalances, cursive drawing, and even the most elliptical, implicit suggestions of narrative were all jettisoned, in various combinations and sometimes all at once. The single indispensable element proved to be color – in generous amounts – which, paradoxically, both emphasized the painting's presence as an object and suggested vast, ambiguous places that one saw into, but could not – even metaphorically – enter.

* *source:* 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by the American art critic Karen Wilkin.

- Size guarantees the purity as well as the intensity needed to suggest indeterminate space: more blue simply being bluer than less blue.

* *from:* the art article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' – Karen Wilkin.

- Touch could be so reduced that paint application in Color Field abstractions can seem, depending on our sympathies, either inexplicably magical or almost mechanical. Color can appear to have been breathed onto the surface or, when thinned down and soaked into the canvas, to have fused with it, the way dye fuses with fabric. The result is an ineffable, seemingly weightless expanse.. ..the result is an exquisitely rarefied type of abstraction in which material means are almost completely subservient to the visual. Any lingering vestiges of the painting's long history as depiction disappears, and we are faced with pure eloquent wordless seeing.

* *source:* the essay: 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by famous art critic Karen Wilkin.

- What the Color Field painters shared most importantly with the Abstract Expressionists was the conviction that the role of art was not to report on the visible, but to reveal the unknown. They shared too, the belief that paintings that resembled nothing preexisting could have the presence, authority and associative richness of other real things in the world. Perhaps because of these shared assumptions, close ties existed among some first-generation Abstract Expressionists and the Color field Painters.

* *from:* 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by American woman art critic Karen Wilkin.

- Pollock's removing the support from the stretcher (he painted often on un-stretched cotton duck, spread on the floor, ed.) freed the painter to work from all directions and allowed boundaries and the orientation of the picture to be decided only at the end (of painting, ed.); practically, it permitted pouring and staining.

* *source:* art critic, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by Karen Wilkin.

- A number of older artists who had initially provided models for the 'post-painterly abstract painters found themselves on the same path as their younger colleagues, sometimes, it seems, even following their lead. Gottlieb, Motherwell and Hofmann, in particular, became part of a complex, intergenerational conversation with the young practitioners of post-painterly abstraction.

* *taken from* article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by the famous American art critic Karen Wilkin.

- ...there is a synergy between the invention of acrylic paint and the Color field painter's exploration of the possibilities of large expanses of intense, relatively unmodulated color, applied with a neutral touch... ..Unlike oils, acrylics remained bright even when diluted (with water, ed.) and could be spread easily and smoothly over large areas. Also unlike oils, they could be both thin and opaque. It is impossible to determine which came first: the painter's desire to cover large surfaces with thin, saturated, evenhanded color or the existence of paint that made this possible.

* *source:* 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by art critic Karen Wilkin.

- The development of the language of color-based abstraction was closely entwined with the changing capabilities of acryl paint, which followed the rapid development of plastics technology in the 1960s. Younger painters associated with the Color Field movement, especially, took full advantage of what new technology made possible, as acryl paint and its additives evolved, using it to expand conceptions of what an abstract painting could be.

* *source of the art quote:* article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' – Karen Wilkin.

- The post-painterly abstract painters' admiration for Matisse, in fact, set them apart from the generation immediately preceding theirs, for whom Picasso retained the greatest authority (as illustrated in the quotes of De Kooning, Gorky and Frankenthaler, for instance, ed.).. ..(but) from Matisse, the Color field painters learned how to build pictures by setting brilliant, unmodulated hues side by side, how to evoke emotional and visual experience by adjusting weight and amounts of color, and how to clarify exuberant chroma by a judicious use of neutrals.

* *from:* article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by American woman art critic on modern art, Karen Wilkin.

- Another potent example of the expressive and pictorial possibilities of large areas of color was provided by the work of Miro, which like Matisse's, was exhibited regularly in New York, and whose biomorphic imagery was crucial to the evolution of postwar New York abstraction.

* *source of the art quote:* the art article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by Karen Wilkin.

- Yet, in the end, Pollock... ..may have been the Color field painters' most authoritative precursor. In describing her early formation, as a precocious New York artist in the early 1950s, Frankenthaler (woman artist who initiated the soak-technique first, fh) has said: '*I looked at and was influenced by both Pollock and De Kooning and eventually felt there were more possibilities for me out of the Pollock vocabulary... ..Pollock used shoulder and ropes and ignored the edges and corners* (alloverness!, ed.). I felt I could stretch more in the Pollock framework... ..You could become a De Kooning disciple or satellite or mirror, but you could depart *from Pollock*.

* *source:* taken from the article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by Karen Wilkin.

- In 1953, Noland and Louis... ..travelled to New York to see galleries and studios and to visit Greenberg (the famous art critic, ed.), whom Noland had met in 1950 at the legendary Black Mountain College and continued to see frequently... ..who arranged for them to see the new work of the young, virtually unknown Frankenthaler, in her absence.... ..Following Frankenthaler's example, the two painters began to experiment with staining on their return to Washington (see the quotes of woman painter Frankenthaler, ed.) .

* *source of the quote:* essay 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by woman art critic Karen Wilkin.

- As the list of artists included in the exhibition 'Post Painterly Abstraction' reveals... ...the selection, a joint effort by Greenberg and James Elliot, the curator at the Los Angeles County Museum who initiated the exhibition, still holds as a fine cross section... ... It also indicates the wide reach of color-based abstraction, by the early 1960s. Artists from New York, Washington D.C., the West Coast, and Canada, were represented, among them – along with such founding members of the Color field School as the painters Frankenthaler, Noland and Louis – Walter Darby Bannard, Jack Bush, Gene Davis, Friedel Dzubas, Sam Francis, Jules Olitski,, Larry Poons, and Frank Stella.
* *source:* article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by Karen Wilkin.

- Yet primary link among the majority of artists now grouped – however casually – under the label 'Color Field' was Clement Greenberg,... ...Greenberg was both a spokesman who championed their efforts and a valued studio visitor... ...He steered collectors in their direction and included their work in exhibitions... ...Further connections were provided by friendships among the artists themselves – who sometimes had met through Greenberg or (Michael) Fried in the first place. Despite these multiple, if often obliquities, the Color Field painters never formed a coherent group, yet the interconnections among them are fascinating and often revealing.
* *from:* article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by art critic Karen Wilkin.

- The three eager young artists Caro (English sculptor in New York that time, ed.) Noland and Olitski frequented one another's studio; Greenberg visited regularly. The result was an extraordinary period of innovation (early 1960s, ed.), cross-fertilization, mutual criticism, and stimulation Each artist's work developed in fascinating ways, spurred by the efforts of his colleagues and their heated debates about what Caro calls 'the onward of art'.
* *source:* taken from 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by American modern art critic Karen Wilkin.

- Much has been written about the visual weightlessness of Color Field painting, about the way thinned-out paint, soaked into unprimed canvas, becomes contiguous with the fabric itself, creating zones of color that appear to have little or no physical presence – that are, in short, for the eye only. The unpainted spaces between these zones, like intervals of silence between notes, can seem as important and evocative as the painted elements, further disembodiment the abstract images.
* *source:* from the article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by American art critic Karen Wilkin.

- It is possible, for example, to find parallels between Color Field's quest for radical simplicity and transparency of intention with Minimalism's striving for economy or to see that the Color Field painters and their contemporaries, the Pop artists, shared a taste for clarity and anonymous facture.Yet these large similarities coexist with profound differences. No matter how simplified, Color Field painting was never reductive in the way that Minimalism is. The color field painters remained faithful to the idea of working as closely as possible out of a pure intuition, on the assumption that

the resulting painting would be revelatory of its maker; they rejected Minimalism's fascination with preconception and systems.

* *source:* article, 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by Karen Wilkin.

- Similarly, Color field painting and Pop Art (like the painters Andy Warhol and lichtenstein, ed.) are separated by fundamentally different attitudes, not only toward imagery but also toward material means. The 'cool' immaculate surfaces and discrete color areas of Color field painting are intended as expressive elements in themselves, (and) not as in Pop Art, as equivalents for the machine-made, mass-produced artifacts of popular culture, advertising and the mass media.

* *source of the quotes:* 'Notes on Color Field Painting' by American art critic Karen Wilkin.

editor Fons Heijnsbroek